

*“I Bring You Good News”*

According to statistics from 2023, American consumers spent an average of \$641 on gifts and holiday items. Gifts for family, friends, and coworkers, in total around 964.4 billion dollars. To put this into context, Spider-Man films are the highest-grossing series based on a single property, earning over \$11 billion at the box office and more than \$19 billion in total. But why do people spend so much money at Christmas? To demonstrate their love for someone else. Be told that some of those gifts were purchased out of obligation. The heart of the Christmas gift is not out of obligation but out of love with no expectation of repayment. A simple thank you is all that is needed. God has provided the gift of grace to your life through a Savior, Jesus Christ.

The songs we have been enjoying singing tonight have words that relate to all kinds of things that are true about Jesus: that he is the Savior who was born in a manger and that his name was Jesus. After all, he would save people from their sins, that he is Emmanuel because he is “God with us”—he is both truly human and truly divine. If we stop and think about this, we should come to realize that it’s a bit like a birthday party when you were a child as you take gifts for whoever’s birthday it is. Then, if it were a birthday party similar to what I would go to, most of the children would end up playing with all the stuff they brought instead of the one whose birthday we came to celebrate. People would say, “Well, where is the birthday boy?” Where is he? Oh, he’s over there in the corner somewhere.

One important thing to do then, and I would encourage you to consider it as you go into this Christmas season, is to not only rehearse the things that are said about Jesus but also consider the things that Jesus said. For example, children say all kinds of funny things, and as they begin to grow, memorable things will be written down or remembered and later held against them for the rest of their lives. Of all the strange things that you hear children say, how could you ever imagine the first recorded words that come from the lips of Jesus in the Gospels?

It’s from the story written in Luke 2:41-52 where there was this fantastic encounter in the temple at the age of twelve when Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. After the Festival, Mary and Joseph realized Jesus was missing, only to find him three days later in the temple courts. Mary had no clue where he was. How do we know? Because the Bible tells us so: **“Why were you looking for me? Didn’t you realize that I had to be about my Father’s business?”**

**Didn't you know that it was proper for me to be in my father's house?** Luke goes on to write, "But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then, he went down to Nazareth with them, and he lived in their home. And then what happens? Years of silence. Eighteen years of silence, to be exact. And then we hear from Jesus again. And he says some incredible things. For example, Jesus says, "For I have come down from heaven to do the Father's will." The only one who says something like this is the one who came down from heaven.

So, this boy, who was nurtured and raised by Mary from a lowly stable, and we now know the answer to the song, "Mary Did You Know," declares that he has come down from heaven to do the Father's will. And the Father's will is that all who look to the Son" that was himself, and believe in him will have everlasting life." In other words, when he said to Mary and Joseph, "Did you not realize that I had to be at my Father's business?" Perhaps, if you think about it in those terms, then Jesus was, if you like, on a business trip, a business trip from heaven. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the triune God, had determined in eternity past that since the world would turn its back on God, instead of leaving the world to itself, they would send someone, and that someone, the second person of the Trinity, Jesus of Nazareth. **"For this purpose, I was born."** I find this statement quite noteworthy. That is why I say to you, you should think about it.

When we read the Gospel writings, we find that they are distinct from each other. Matthew and Luke contain the birth narratives; John begins back in eternity, and Mark, always in a hurry, gets straight to the business. Meaning there is no birth narrative. Mark starts with John the Baptist and then goes directly to Jesus. And so, I want to tell you what happens when Jesus steps forward. What does he say? Remember, we have heard lots of things said about him, but what about what is said by him? Let me read from my Bible beginning in 1:14 so that you, too, will know. "After John was put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. **The time has come, he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news."**

Friends, **"I bring you good news:"** God still loves the world even though the world has turned its back on him. Proclaiming the good news "and saying," The time is fulfilled, and that, in other words, all the stuff in the Old Testament that has been pointing forward is now fulfilled in Christ. The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel. That is the word that goes out—the word that goes out tonight to all the world.

What happens next is that the religious people are immediately not pleased. They wonder about their lives and their futures, trying to make sense of their existence, and are very keen to hear what Jesus has to say. Jesus begins to do miraculous things, which you would expect. If God came down, the surprise would not be that he did miracles; no, the surprise would be if there were no miracles. He heals the leper and deals with the demons, and the crowds following him grow. We learn that He likes to get up early in the morning and go away by himself. Then the disciples go and find him, saying, “Hey, Jesus, wow, this thing is going fantastic, and everyone is looking for you. In reply, Jesus said, **“Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came.”** And that is what Jesus does, but I don’t have time to tell you a fantastic story about a leper, and you are probably glad too, I am sure. Perhaps you can read it later for yourself in Mark chapter 2.

However, I do want to share a story about another man. A man who, as you will see, a man who felt the love of God. A man who wondered about his life. It is a story about the sweet singer and writer Ira D. Sankey. In 1876, Sankey was traveling up the Delaware River on a steamboat that Christmas Eve, and on this journey, a number of passengers were gathered on the deck. Someone said, “Mr. Sankey is aboard!” Let’s ask him to sing for us! Deciding what to sing, he stood for a moment as if in prayer. He wanted to sing a Christmas song, but somehow, the words of the Shepherd Song came to his heart. “Savior, like a shepherd, leads us; much we need thy tender care. In thy pleasant pastures feed us, for our use thy folds prepare.” It’s on page 161 of our hymnal if you care to look.

Among the listeners, there was a deep stillness. The words of the song tell the sweet story of God’s love for wandering men and women as the beautiful melody floated out across the deck and water into the night. Every heart stilled. At the end of the song, one man stepped forward, a rough-looking man, and asked Sankey. Did you ever serve in the Union Army? I did, answered Sankey. I entered the army in the spring of 1860. Can you remember if you were doing picket duty on a bright moonlit night in 1862? In a moment of surprise, Sankey said yes. Were (pause) you? Yes, but I was serving in the Confederate Army, and when I saw you standing at your post, I said to myself, “That fellow will never get away from here alive. I raised my musket and aimed. I was in the shadow, completely hidden, while you walked in full moonlight.

At that instant, you began to sing, just as you did a moment ago. The song was “Savior like a shepherd lead us.” The music reached my heart. I took my finger off the trigger and said to myself, I’ll wait until the end of the song and shoot afterward. As you sang, you reached the place where it says, “We are Thine, do thou befriend us, be the guardian of our way.” I could hear every word perfectly, and how the memories came to my heart! I began to think of my childhood and my mother. She loved God. She had sung that song to me many times. But she died all too soon. Otherwise, I think my life might have been different. At the end of the song, I could not raise my musket again; it was impossible to take aim; though I stood in the shadows, you still stood in the bright moonlight, a perfect target.

"Then I thought of the Lord. I looked at you and thought, 'The Lord who was able to save that man from certain death must surely be great and mighty.' My arm dropped to my side, and I could not tell you all the things I thought at that time. My heart was smitten, but I didn't know what to do.

"Just now, when you were about to sing and stood quietly as if praying, I recognized you. I've wandered far and wide since that other occasion. I have never found that Shepherd. Please help me now find a cure for my sick soul."

Deeply moved, Mr. Sankey threw his arms around the man who had been his enemy and who, indeed, could have ended his life. That Christmas Eve night, a former soldier found the great and tender Shepherd as his Savior.

So why did I tell you this story? It’s about the love of our Savior, who healed this man and granted mercy and grace. Jesus is interested in all of your conditions and concerns. But he did not come for that. No, and here’s the life-changing news, friends. The reason Jesus came was to grant forgiveness. You might ask, why would we care? I’ll tell you why. We all need forgiveness.

Friends, I am a sinner; I need a Savior to lead me. Unless we have actually done what Jesus said – repented and believed the gospel – then we are sitting here right now tonight in need of a Savior, perhaps relying on something that we have done or that we are planning to do. We have heard things said about Jesus. We have heard about his birth, and we have listened to the words of Jesus. But here are my final closing thoughts. Do you have anything you would like to say to Jesus? If so, what would you say? Jesus has given us the greatest gift we could ever receive.

Perhaps a prayer would be in order. Maybe you think you can’t seem to put words together to pray, then let us pray together in case of all the things that have been going on in your life that brought you here tonight to hear the things said

about Jesus and to listen to the words said by Jesus, and then the things we might be able to speak to Jesus—a unison prayer of confession as we move into the Sacrament of Holy Communion instituted by Christ, sealing the benefits of his work and sacrifice, and our spiritual nourishment and growth in Him. Let's pray.

Eternal God, it is Christmas Eve again. I know I am not worthy of being accepted by you. I don't deserve your gift of eternal life. I am guilty of rebelling against you and ignoring you. I need forgiveness. Thank you for sending Jesus to die for me so that I may be forgiven. Thank you that you rose from the dead to give me new life. Please forgive me and change me so that I may live with Jesus as my ruler and friend. Amen.